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Chapter 25

Relating to and Through Land: An Ecology of Relations in Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*

“Sometimes, by taking up the problems of the Other, it is
possible to find oneself.”

- Edouard Glissant

“I believe that errors of this kind are very many in the book
Chaka; but I am not very concerned about them because I
am not writing history, I am writing a tale...”

- Thomas Mofolo

The Politics of Ecology and the Postcolonial

The relationship between the camps of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism has been marked by a history of tenuous and often complex and difficult rapprochement. Indeed, the two critical constellations have struggled to find common ground upon which to think critically about *both* postcolonial studies' historically-grounded critique of neo-/colonial nation states *and* the continuing engagement with forms of “green imperialism” and ecological exploitation that continue as part of larger discourses around environmentalism, especially in the postcolonies of the world. Moreover, if we look not only to the aesthetic concerns of postcolonial critical discourse but also to its mechanisms

for historiographical reorientation, then perhaps it is not too far-fetched to say that on some foundational level postcolonial criticism/studies is an epistemological retooling of modes of representation; a seminal concern being the quest for and fashioning of sets of imaginative registers for representationally reclaiming the land of (formerly) colonized spaces. As Simon Gikandi writes, “the literary project of decolonization was driven by what one may call a double mimesis: the imperative to question existing colonialist theories of representation and *the desire to inscribe the lived experiences of the colonized.*”ⁱ

Environmental and eco-theorist Pablo Mukherjee makes a poignant and compelling claim for the integration of the two fields when he writes that:

Surely, any field purporting to theorise the global conditions of colonialism and imperialism (let us call it postcolonial studies) cannot but consider the complex interplay of environmental categories such as water, land, energy, habitat, migration with political or cultural categories such as state, society, conflict, literature, theatre, visual arts. Equally, any field purporting to attach interpretive importance to environment (let us call it eco/environmental studies) must be able to trace the social, historical and material co-ordinates of categories such as forest, rivers, bio-regions and species.ⁱⁱ

Mukherjee’s claim is compelling precisely because he presents these two epistemological formulations as historically conjoined in both an intuitive and material way. One cannot think the ecological imaginary without the historical reorientation – of texts, and actors –

central to the project of postcolonial studies. *Ecology*, which maps the relationships between a given environment and the organisms within it, as well as between these organisms, serves as an important conceptual lens through which to chart the entanglement of postcolonial and eco-critical concerns and paradigms. In this chapter, I argue that the literature of early-twentieth century Mosotho writer Thomas Mofolo prefigures this entanglement between a politics of postcolonialism and a grounding in the aesthetics of an ecological imaginary, and does so as a way to construct a different narrative of modernity for the South African nation.ⁱⁱⁱ While the state envisioned the modernity of South Africa as buttressed by a platform of segregation -- a geo-politics of separation grounded in the *soil* of this place that would later be consolidated under the banner of apartheid -- Mofolo's ecological vision locates the basis of historical relationality between southern Africans in the very same landscape. Consequently, Mofolo's imagining of the future is based on a historical relationship to the landscape of southern Africa, and its role as common ground for narratives of encounter, collusion, and mixture between Africans; these are narratives of a southern African ecological modernity grounded in its very soil. As such, this chapter explores Mofolo's vision through a reading of his seminal work, the historical fiction *Chaka* (1925),^{iv} characterized as the first African novel, for the ways in which his narrative *thinks* the history of the southern African landscape from an ecological perspective. I argue that not only does the novel work against the racist policies of the South African state, which was increasingly grounding its segregationist platforms in the very *soil* of the nation, but I also posit that Mofolo's vision of a southern African ecology of relations between otherwise segregated Africans can be read as an other and earlier genealogical moment in

the history of ecological writing in and on southern Africa – writing that is useful to our contemporary, eco-critical concerns.

The novel *Chaka* is, at least partly, the creative result of Mofolo's travels through "Zululand" in present-day KwaZulu-Natal, coming from his native Lesotho to do what might be characterized as ethnographic field work, performing interviews and compiling information on everything from military customs to folklore and fairytales of the amaZulu. In interviews conducted with the author's son, Mofolo Mofolo, Daniel P. Kunene, relates the son's claim that, "the original manuscript contained at least two chapters,"^v which described in some detail the history and customs of the Zulus, as well as their military systems which had apparently impressed Mofolo highly during his researches in Natal."^{vi} The narrative, which self-consciously positions itself in the crucible between the historical and the fictional, is the tale of the eponymous anti-hero Chaka, his birth, his ascent to unprecedented power and the cataclysmic effects this had on southern African geo-politics, ending finally in his dramatic death at the hands of his own brothers. Among Mofolo's many authorial flourishes is the question of legitimacy surrounding Chaka's birth, which drives much of the plot and in turn is centered on Chaka's initial alienation from the community and his subsequent quest to regain the ascension to his father's crown. On the surface, Chaka's legitimacy is significant precisely because it sets him on a path towards power upon which he encounters forces which mold and shape him as a character and as a would-be ruler, but which consequently also shape the cultural, racial, and political topography of southern Africa.

But perhaps more importantly for our purposes here, within the novel each of the encounters that move Chaka towards his destiny of unprecedented power also involve a

certain engagement with the earth; whether through submersion in water or prostrations in the soil, Chaka's eventual power can be read as a series of submersions/immersions into the ecology of southern Africa. Thus, he represents the world of Southern Africa through a distinctly ecological imaginary, one in which future intersections between postcolonial thought and eco-critical concerns are signaled through the land of southern Africa. Beginning with the *difaqane* – rather than colonial encounter or expansion, Mofolo's novel offers a rethinking of the genealogies of modernity in South Africa, which in turn occasions a reformulation of the ecological and its relationship to the formation and representation of collective identities. In other words, a sense of modernity, especially a post-colonial modernity for southern Africa has, for Mofolo, a different point of origin, both genealogically and geographically. *Chaka* reroutes the thinking of modernity through an ecological archive of southern Africa, where engagements on and through the land offer different narratives to the otherwise dominant colonial ones.

Indeed, it is this ecological vision that not only marks Mofolo as a prescient African writer– a quality captured by Gikandi's description of Mofolo's writing as “an early postcolonial style,” but it is also Mofolo's notion of modernity as not coming from elsewhere, which allows for the idea that ecological and environmental thinking are not recent phenomena in this context.^{vii} Moreover, it suggests that an African ecological imaginary must be thought of as having a *different* genealogy than one serving as a proxy narrative to the imperial exportation of modernity from Europe to the colonial world. For instance, even well meaning critics who advocate for an African instantiation of eco-criticism, while being proponents of “tak[ing] into account the specificity of cultural,

discursive, and material contexts in Africa,” still subscribe to narratives of the “ways that modernity *has shaped* Africa; and the kinds of *local responses* that have been engendered.”^{viii} While I am in complete agreement with the fundamental currents of environmental thinking about Africa, such as the proposition that “an African ecocriticism would differentiate itself from ecocriticism in the North...to work from an understanding of the complexity of African pasts...”^{ix} I do however take issue with the persistent figuring of Africa as a passive landscape which can only offer “responses to currents of *modernity that reached Africa from Europe* initially, but that *now influence Africa from multiple centers*, European, American, and now Asian...”^{ix} In order to think a different and longer genealogy to ecological thinking in Africa, a genealogy which in turn maps differently our notions of where and when ideas of modernity have been negotiated, interrogated, and represented, I will argue that Mofolo’s *Chaka* is just such an example of early ecological thinking in Africa. Moreover, the novel narrates its own ideas about what modernity might mean in southern Africa, especially in terms of ecological and environmental concerns that produce – rather than respond to – modernity.

Moreover, while most ecocriticism and environmental studies are largely presentist and even futurist, I want to suggest that there is much to be discovered through a historical approach to these questions in the context of African writing. For instance, Rob Nixon has written recently that, “...postcolonial studies at its most incisive remains, it seems to me, is an invaluable critical presence in an era of resurgent imperialism, an era in which – sometimes through outright, unregulated plunder, sometimes under camouflage of developmental agendas – a neoliberal order has widened, with ruinous environmental repercussions, the gulf between the expanding class of the super-rich and

our planet's 3 billion ultra poor.”^x While Nixon's critique is aimed towards a violence spreading out across the future of the “developing” world, I want to direct our attention *back*, to an earlier historical moment at the beginning of the twentieth century in southern Africa, where a confluence of (settler) colonial and imperial forces gave rise to a version of ecological thinking that was invested in undoing violent articulations of racial and ethnic division made through the metrics of racialized landscapes. In this chapter, I argue that Mofolo's ecological vision of southern Africa at the opening of the twentieth century maps a historical subjectivity based on relations between *inhabitants* of this space, rather than the claims of originary purity being staked out by the racist machinations of the South African state, as a result of the colonial formations it emerged from.

Perhaps one of the most formative thinkers of eco-criticism, Ursula Heise, asks “whether it is possible to return to more ecologically attuned ways of inhabiting nature, and what would be the cultural prerequisites for such a change?”^{xi} I argue that Mofolo offers just such an example of a cultural shift towards a more ecologically intimate relationship, not only to nature and geography, but also a more nuanced relation to the geo-political machinations of the nation state. The life-world of *Chaka* is a chiaroscuro of encounters mapping relationships that are more sensitive to the multiple forms of relationality predicated upon the landscape of southern Africa. Indeed, Mofolo is acutely aware that if his novel is to narrate a political shift in the relations between citizens of the state, then it must be predicated on deep historical and ecological connections. In other words, the subjectivity that Mofolo articulates is based on a radically *different relationship to both history and to land, as well as to the history of land in southern Africa*. In turn, Mofolo prefigures and echoes Roland Barthes's call to “always strip

down Nature, its ‘laws’ and its ‘limits,’ so as to expose History there, and finally to posit Nature as itself historical.”^{xii} *Chaka*, I argue, is an example of such a novelistic treatment of nature, where a refiguring of the ecology of (colonial) space, and the lines of separation projected onto it, is entangled with a project of history. Furthermore, Mofolo’s style for representing the ecology of southern Africa as a space of historical relation and collusion resonates with Caribbean theorist Edouard Glissant’s claim regarding the islands of the Caribbean basin, that, “Our landscape is its own monument: its meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history.”^{xiii} For Mofolo it is impossible to think about a political reorientation of citizenship, without rethinking not only the historical relationship to land, but also the forms of relation that landscape has precipitated. It is this reorientation that serves as the basis for a newly imagined form of national belonging.

As Glissant writes, “the politics of ecology...far from consenting to sacred intolerance, it is a driving force for the relational interdependence of all lands, of the whole Earth.”^{xiv} Indeed, according to this politics of ecology, the landscape itself in Mofolo’s novels becomes the common ground for a relational model of belonging and the basis for a future of southern African (national) citizenship. Based on a reading of *Chaka*, written in 1909-1910, and which chronicles the ascent of the legendary consolidator of the Zulu peoples and the cataclysmic effects of the so-called *difaqane*, or the scattering of tribes of southern Africa at the hand of the eponymous ruler, I argue for a history of ecological thinking in southern African writing much *longer* than is usually accounted for. Moreover, through comparison with other forms of ecologically based discourses of identity and belonging, notably Edouard Glissant, I demonstrate how

Mofolo's vision of southern Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century maps and models forms of subjectivity and citizenship – inflected with the land – that inform our current notions of belonging, both racially and nationally.

The Politics of Unification and Environments of Segregation

The years 1909 – 1910 saw the consolidation of the four colonies of the Cape Colony, forming the Union of South Africa. A newly minted member of the Commonwealth, the Union was nominally subject to the British crown, but would also function according to a provincial parliamentary system. The 1909 South Africa Act proclaims that,

...the Colonies of the Cape of Good Hope, Natal, the Transvaal, and the Orange River Colony, hereinafter called the Colonies, shall be united in a Legislative Union under one Government under the name of the Union of South Africa. On and after the day appointed by such proclamation the Government and Parliament of the Union shall have full power and authority within the limits of the Colonies, but the King may at any time after the proclamation appoint a governor-general for the Union.

The unification of South Africa, being a symbolic coup for the British Crown, was ultimately, a racial victory, solidifying a legislative safety valve that would protect white rule in the country. The unique system of provincial administrations meant that in matters of enfranchisement, the cultural and ethnic differences between English- and Afrikaans-

speaking white South Africans could and would be placed aside in order to present a united racial front against the ‘African,’ ‘Coloured’ and ‘Indian’ peoples of South Africa. The politics of unification surrounding the Union of South Africa, based on historical projections of (imagined) difference, as well as current and future projects of segregation, must be read with a touch of irony for the ways in which this politics of unity were predicated from the beginning upon historical and geographical separation. More importantly for our purposes here, the Unification consolidated and formalized a set of colonial practices already in motion across southern Africa. But also, retrospectively, the Union can be read as a violent victory of racial politics, won for its ability to simultaneously activate a white constituency across a national body politic while in the same measure splintering possibilities for any such non-white coalitions. These politics of unification set in motion 80 years of national politics based on two key mythologies related to the *land* of South Africa: the first was a project of racialization of the landscape based on narratives developed through state projects of anthropology and under the aegis of the Native Affairs department, which sought to fix the relationship of certain groups of people – whether classified racially or ethnically – to a specific territory. The second, and related, element was a projection of these mythologies of racial(-ized) landscapes back into the historical archive of southern Africa, and thereby creating an imagined precedence for a political economy of contemporary segregation in the twentieth century.

Meanwhile, a 1912 retrospective chronicle published by the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society of Lesotho notes that Thomas Mofolo had submitted a manuscript, a historical fiction about the history of the Zulu peoples and the ascension of the legendary King Shaka, which the author had written during the same years of the Unification, 1909-

1910. Even though the Mission Press had indeed published Mofolo's earlier works, the submission of this manuscript – which would become the novel *Chaka* – began a censorial standoff lasting nearly 15 years, until the novel was published in its original Sesotho in 1925.^{xv} While *Chaka* returns to the birth and life of the legendary nineteenth century consolidator and ruler of the Zulu empire, Chaka, I argue that the text's historical vision – of South Africa and its geographies at the beginning of the nineteenth century – imagines a model of national formation different from the segregationist politics of the author's own moment. I have suggested elsewhere that the reason for the delayed publication of the manuscript has to do in part with the unorthodox imagining of national formation in this moment. Note how Glissant writes of Mofolo:

“The epic of the Zulu Emperor Chaka, as related by Thomas Mofolo, seems to me to exemplify an African poetics... It is an epic that, while enacting the “universal” themes of passion and man's destiny, is not concerned with the *origin* of a people or its early history. Such an epic does not include a creation myth. On the contrary, it is related to a much more dangerous moment in the experience of the people concerned, that of its forthcoming contact...”^{xvi}

Mofolo's vision of southern Africa, its peoples but also its geographies – rather than a historical topography of difference and division – is also resonant with Glissant's notion of Relation. Glissant notes that in the articulation of a “national literature,” which happens when a community “tries to put together reasons for its existence,” that in this literature of national formation, the “landscape... stops being merely decorative or

supportive and emerges as a full character. Describing the landscape is not enough. The individual, the community, and the land are inextricable in the process of creating history.”^{xvii}

Moreover, I want to think about Mofolo’s imagining of southern Africa’s historical entanglements as part of what Glissant calls an “ecological vision of Relation.”^{xviii} In opposition to “root identity” – which is founded upon a “myth of the creation of the world” – Glissant writes that relation identity “does not think of a land as a territory from which to project toward other territories but as a place where one gives-on-and-with [*donner-avec*]” and also that, “Relation identity exults the thought of errantry and of totality.”^{xix} I posit that not only does the historical geography of southern Africa function in *Chaka* as the common ground of relationality between and amongst groups otherwise and increasingly being delineated by the South African state in Mofolo’s time, but also that the author’s own act of narrative creation models a southern African subjectivity transgressive of such segregationist state boundaries being erected. If the life-world of the novel opens “in the olden days when the people were still settled upon the land [and] the nations were living in peace, each one in its own original territory...,” then such Acadian, idyllic tranquility is removed from the text’s ontology, to the time of creation mythology when “Nkulunkulu, the Great-Great One, caused the people to emerge from a bed of reeds.”^{xx} Mofolo’s tale is about a time that *follows* upon that time. When the *difaqane* occasioned a massive shift in the demographical, as well as cultural, ethnic and political, makeup of southern Africa. *Chaka* returns to this moment in order to interrogate the narrative of (national) modernity being written in Mofolo’s own time. Mofolo’s imagining of modernity in southern Africa is neither a proxy narrative for

European contact, nor is it a re-inscription of the lines of segregation upon which the South African state in the early twentieth century was drawing its own maps of national modernity.

The moment of national consolidation in South Africa, encapsulated by the 1909 South Africa Act, laid the foundation for nearly a century of continuing segregationist politics as the basis for a sense of national modernity. For example, by 1950, Theophilus Ebenhaezer Dönges, then Minister of the Interior for South Africa, could introduce the now infamous Population Registration Act with an explicit declaration that, “The determination of a person’s race is of the greatest importance in the enforcement of any existing or future laws in connection with separate residential areas.”^{xxi} Upon ratification of the act, it was incumbent upon the South African government, now two years into National Party leadership, to determine and maintain a *connection between race and land*. According to the preamble as well as the legislation itself, race would be the determinate, and explicit, index for nation formation as well as what form the nation would take.

It was on the heels of this foundational piece of legislation that the Group Areas Act (1950) provided for the comprehensive segregation by color of all commercial and residential arrangements at every level of society, from urban centers to remote villages. Dönges validates the segregationist logic of the Group Areas Act with a predictably moralistic rhetoric, suggesting that it was now incumbent upon the state to reduce racial conflict, otherwise assumed to be a natural occurrence of racial encounter. The Minister states that the Group Areas Act was:

designed to eliminate friction between the races in the Union because we believe, and *believe strongly that points of contact – all unnecessary points of contact – between the races must be avoided*. If you reduce the number of points of contact to the minimum, you reduce the possibility of friction. Contact brings about friction, and friction brings about heat, and may cause a conflagration.^{xxii}

Wrapped in a mechanical metaphor smacking of apartheid's desperate attempts to inculcate itself into a global imaginary of modernity and progress, Dönges' statement also belies the regime's anxiety around the fundamental question of potential race contact and the potentially more dangerous notion of race mixture. Apartheid, through a legal program of segregation and an intellectual project of historical delineation of races, would systematically deny the potential for social, cultural, and especially racial interactions, as these intimacies were thought to be antithetical to the future of a strong national formation.

Dönges' statements also belie the first of two foundational impulses of apartheid: the first orienting principle is clear in the Minster's address, which focuses on curtailing all present and future interracial contact. South Africa, in the imagination of its early, segregationist and apartheid architects would be a nation founded upon division, not only of its people, *but also of the land upon which those people lived*. The second principle entailed a project of myth-making by which (racial) difference would also be projected back into the past. In order to create a 'modern' nation based on present and future separateness, the history of South Africa would also be a history of difference and

separation. Speaking broadly about colonialism's historical imagination, Frantz Fanon writes that,

The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future national culture. In the sphere of psycho-affective equilibrium it is responsible for an important change in the native. Perhaps we haven't sufficiently demonstrated that colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it.^{xxiii}

It is clear how apartheid's vision of modernity was based upon and justified by this mythology of a racially delineated past, which it in turn exercised through a project of investing the land with these mythologies of delineation, based on a racialization.

The speeches of apartheid politicians, such as Dönges as well as Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd -- National Party Prime Minister and popularly known as the "architect of apartheid" -- ensured that apartheid's vision of the future was a racist modernity grounded in various orienting rhetorical 'logics.' For instance, while Dönges relies on mechanical "friction," Verwoerd's couches Separate Development in an image of ecological division. On May 7th, 1957 Verwoerd, then South African Minister of Native Affairs, delivered a speech entitled "Separate Development: The positive side,"^{xxiv} to commemorate the opening of the Transkei Territorial Authority. Verwoerd's speech

marks a number of monumental shifts in the development of both segregationist policies in South Africa, as well as the larger “grand apartheid” vision of a southern Africa nation-state grid of autonomous racial homelands. The speech marks an inaugural shift in the life of apartheid, expressing the ideological as well as practical parts of Verwoerd’s version of segregation – “separate development” – articulated here in distinction to many of his predecessors (most notably D.F. Malan and J.G. Strijdom) who advocated for a much more virulent and a raw variety of white racism. Verwoerd’s ‘separate but equal’ platform, symbolized in this speech by the figure of the “fruit bearing tree” of separate development, not only consciously continued to mark a distinction between apartheid segregationist rhetoric and the racism of German National Socialism (a charge continually leveled against the National Party from the 1930’s onwards), it also thereby placed apartheid discourse in line with the segregationist – “separate but equal” – platforms of the United States.^{xxv} Verwoerd imagines South Africa’s racial modernity at this moment as an agricultural contract between white and black; *a patronizing ecological patronage system of racial and ethnic delineation to be grounded in the very soil of the nation.*

Mofolo’s *Chaka* and an Ecological Imaginary of Southern Africa

To return to Mofolo’s *Chaka*, it is a short novel describing both the birth and life of the nineteenth-century consolidator of the Zulu peoples and their cultural customs in particular, as well as the nineteenth century southern African demographic tectonics that precipitated this group’s coalescence more generally. The novel is the imaginative result of Mofolo’s travels through KwaZulu during the time of the Bambatta Rebellion, taking

ethnographical field notes on the customs and folklore of the amaZulu. Generically, the novel employs Shakespearean drama, African oral epic form, as well as a curious blend of anthropological account and mythological storytelling to conjure up a legend existing within the southern African imaginary, one that Mofolo then retools in order to think otherwise than the nationalist and segregationist formulations of his own moment. In other words, in response to the reifying, classificatory and segregating schemes of the pre-apartheid imaginary, Mofolo's *Chaka* poses something of a historical recuperation. However, what is recuperated is a southern African history of differences, encounters between these differences, even their entanglements, but rarely their reconciliation.^{xxvi} When interviewed about his writing of *Chaka*, Mofolo reveals how he uses the literary to complicate the historical, infusing it with the mythic, but also undoing history's epistemological pillars of truth-telling in exchange for a more productively opaque narrative style. Mofolo exclaims that:

I believe that errors of this kind are very many in the book *Chaka*; but I am not very concerned about them because I am not writing history, I am writing a tale, or I should say I am writing what actually happened, but to which a great deal has been added, and from which a great deal has been removed, so that much has been left out, and much has been written that did not actually happen, with the aim solely of fulfilling my purpose in writing this book.^{xxvii}

Mofolo's peripatetic description of his text prefigures the itinerant traveller we witness traversing the landscape of southern African in the first pages of the *Chaka* text, a figure

whose movements across the geography of southern Africa map an imaginary of historical of entanglement, mixture, opacity, and relationality. In so doing, Mofolo models a different model of national becoming based on a shared “ecological vision of relation.”

In Mofolo’s resuscitation of the history as well as the legend of Chaka and the character’s cultural, ethnic, and political consolidation of many of the peoples of southern Africa, the novel invests in an aesthetic economy of the landscape. Thinking through the ecology of the novel’s setting, Mofolo imagines a southern African life-world where the histories of political upheaval, demographical shifts, and the collusions of various peoples are an effect of inhabitants’ *relationship to the soil* upon which they meet. Mofolo rethinks the history of ethnic and national consolidation, not as a point of origin, but rather as point of contact and mixture imagined through the land. The novel is the story of the life, ascension to ruler of the Zulu kingdom, and eventual death of Chaka, told against and through the landscape of southern Africa, imagined by Mofolo as an ecosystem productive of relations across otherwise delineated groups of people. Indeed, from opening to close, the story of Chaka is imagined and related through the particular ecological nature of its setting. After much cartographical description of southern Africa (discussed below) in the opening pages, Mofolo’s writing remains attentive to the role played by the landscape, and offers a survey of how the variegations of the geography map a particular texture of the novel. Existing somewhere between the novelist and the storyteller, Mofolo’s unique style means that the reader follows his tale, of Chaka’s birth, his exile and eventual rule, and even his death, as it traverses the landscape of southern Africa, locating this historical tale in the deep ecological specificity of its setting. While I

will discuss in more detail below, I want to initially put forward the idea that, in Mofolo's telling, in fact *Chaka* could not be imagined without the material and symbolic economy rendered through the ecology of the place. Indeed, Mofolo's feat as a writer is that in re-reading this novel, it becomes nearly impossible to imagine a modern South Africa that isn't predicated upon various ecosystems of relation, collusion, and mixture.

We enter the diegetic frame of *Chaka* through what I am calling a cartographical perspective, an aerial frame that maps the geographical contours of southern Africa. It is within this map(-ping) that we first encounter Mofolo's curious itinerant traveler who embodies Mofolo's own ideology behind the writing of the novel. The novel begins with these lines:

South Africa is a large headland situated between two oceans, one to the east and one to the west.^{xxviii} The nations that inhabit it are numerous and greatly varied in custom and language. Yet they easily divide themselves into three large groups: the nations settled along the western Seaboard are of a yellow complexion. They are the San and the Khoi. The ones in the centre are the Batswana and the Basotho. Those to the east are the Bakone or the Matebele. The boundaries between them are prominent and visible; they are the boundaries created by God, not by man... These nations are markedly distinct from each other, so much so that *a person travelling from the west to the east* is immediately conscious of coming into a different country and among a strange

people when he arrives among the Sotho nations in the
 centre, and likewise when he descends towards the Matebele
 nations over there beyond the Maloti mountains.^{xxix}

Such a textual framing would initially seem to reinforce, if even implicitly, the cartographical imperatives of the nascent and segregationist South African state. Indeed, this passage does seem to initially re-inscribe the racial and ethnic divisions foundational to the South African state, making them appear environmentally inherent to the geography of the space itself. However, if we focus on the narrative persona of this frame, this “person travelling from west to east” and the ways this traveler stages acts of geographical transversal – indeed, as the opening action of the novel we witness movements across different life-worlds – then perhaps we can read the novel as setting up a more complex cartographical relationship to the landscape of South Africa, one predicated on relationality.

I believe that this peripatetic style, figured both in Mofolo’s own creative self-description, as well as the “traveller” across the landscape of the text, enacts what Glissant calls a form of “errantry.” This is not simply to say that Mofolo privileges a form of wandering, but rather that his text embodies the ethics of errantry that Glissant has also described.^{”xxx} Both Mofolo – as a self-reflexive writer – as well as his novel demonstrate the ways in which “the thought of errantry is also the thought of what is relative...The thought of errantry is a poetics...the tale of errantry is the tale of Relation.”^{”xxxi} In the transversal of southern African space, there is the production of a poetics for representing that landscape. A seemingly simple formulation, there is an ideological imperative in Mofolo’s method that stands askance to the state strictures of

the moment, which were increasingly inhibiting such movements, relations, and representations across southern Africa.

As the nameless traveler of the opening paragraph traverses the landscape of southern Africa, with each passing boundary of the landscape witnessing, “nations [that] are markedly distinct” we come to read the ways in which Mofolo has written a novel that is at once about both difference and recognition; indeed, it is in the tension between what one expects to find and what is actually encountered (as the reader follows the traveler across the landscape of South Africa) that lies the ecological politics of this novel. For example, this itinerant reading practice precipitated by Mofolo’s style is also resonant with Glissant’s distinction between “circular nomadism” and “arrowlike nomadism.”^{xxxii} “Circular nomadism”, Glissant tells us, is a form of “errantry” which “silently emerges from the destructuring of compact national identities that yesterday were still triumphant.” Moreover, this errant “search for the Other” is a “poetics...the tale of relation.”^{xxxiii} Mofolo’s “discovery” of South Africa stages a form of circular nomadism at the heart of which is the search for the Other or, rather, textual and creative “detours that lead away from anything totalitarian.”^{xxxiv} Reading across and traveling through the (historical) landscapes of South Africa stages a recognition of relationality based upon a shared experience of the ecologies of this place, and leading to what Neil Lazarus describes as the novel’s encapsulation of the “psycho-dynamics of...land-based experience.”^{xxxv}

However, this so-called psycho-dynamics are, indeed, not meant to be, clear. Mofolo writes the experience of location through a series of placements and displacements, meant to exist in tension with one another, and thereby push against the

state structures of imposed topographical clarity when it came to the delineation of peoples and their supposed ethnic and racial home(-lands). While I would mostly agree with Lazarus's claims that, "the opening of Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* is exemplary, inasmuch as it does not simply set the scene and place the plot into motion, but serves rather to introduce us to a whole symbolic economy – or 'structure of feeling.'" I argue that neither the economy nor the structure is necessarily a clearly delineated one. In other words, in the textual excavation of the soil composing the place of this novel we are not meant to find clarity, but rather a relational opacity. For instance, the passage following the aerial frame above is just such an excavation:

The greater portion of the land of the Bokone, which lies between the Maloti and the sea, is covered by forest. Besides, the crops there are never bitten by frost, for there are only light frosts because of the nearness of the sea. It is a land of lush greenness, and of extremely rich pasturage. Its soil is dark, and that means that it produces much food; its indigenous grass is the luxuriant *seboku*; its water lies in the marshes, and that means that its cattle grow very fat. There are numerous rivers, and that means that rain is plentiful. It is a land of dense mists which often clear only after the sun has risen high, and that means that there are no droughts since the moisture takes long to dry up.^{xxxvi}

I argue that the passage above is impactful precisely because we are meant to understand – and intuitively so – that this ecological intuition is predicated upon an unknown space –

both to the author and the reader – a space we have just been aerially telescoped into. Moreover, what Mofolo so trenchantly accomplishes with this passage is both the production of an ecological imagination based on an environment that is (geographically, culturally, etc.) not his own, but also if this in an ordering of a life-world, than it actually succeeds in creating an order of things that further obfuscates any presumably neat relationships between spaces and the meanings they are meant to inhere; (racial) meanings increasingly being projected upon South African space by the state. The ‘logical’ of this eco-logical system is not necessarily clearly delineated in the Western, Cartesian sense. Mofolo’s tableau of southern Africa maps an ecological order that predicates relations between and across the taxonomical boundaries of the ruling order.

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin describe how “Ecology...tends to function more as aesthetics than as *methodology* in eco/environmental criticism, providing the literary-minded critic with a storehouse of individual and collective metaphors through which the socially transformative workings of the ‘environmental imagination’ can be mobilised and performed.”^{xxxvii} In this way, and with a mythopoetic orientation to the aesthetic nature of the environment, Mofolo’s is an ecology which breaks down the logical, the rational, the ordering, the governing; reaches across the lines of the racial/ethnic order to find meaning on the other side. Likewise, Deloughrey and Handley note how,

“This legacy of capturing and renaming nature leaves the postcolonial writer in the position of having to renegotiate the terms of taxonomy, struggling to articulate new relationships and new meanings in the tired language of empire... This self-

conscious process of renaming and revisioning is a subversion
of the colonial language of taxonomy, discipline and control,
and a key element in postcolonial literary production”^{xxxviii}

The eco-logical order of *Chaka* is not only a critique of the order of governance that divides space and the relations between these spaces, but Mofolo’s ecology, as Glissant argues, if it is extended beyond “mankind’s drive to extend to the planet Earth the former sacred thought of Territory”, then this ecology “will bear the germ of criticism of territorial thought [of its sacredness and exclusiveness], so that ecology will then act as a politics.”^{xxxix} Indeed, in *Chaka* we find what may be one of the first examples of an early postcolonial literary politics, precisely because of a characteristic sense of re-investment in and reimagining of the epistemological conditions for the representations of the ecologies of colonial space. As such, we find in Mofolo’s “ordering” that things are not so very ordered – despite, or because of – the incessant language to the contrary. Indeed, in this ecology of relations we find that the categorical messiness *is* the political gesture.

Two further passages help to convey the ways in which the textual life-world of *Chaka* imagines its composite environments and the ecological intimacies impacting the formation of its characters, and in particular its hero-villain Chaka. As a function of Chaka’s alienation, as well as his quest for his father’s throne, his mother seeks medicinal salves for her son’s ostracized and even exiled position vis-à-vis the community. In addition to a treatment with traditional herbal remedies, Chaka’s otherness is ritualized in the text through his monthly practice of bathing alone in a particularly isolated pool of the Mfalozi-Mhlope River. Each month, on a day appointed by the traditional healer employed by his mother Nandi, Chaka returns to this same bathing spot in the river, a

particularly ominous section described as “an ugly place...a frightening stretch of water, dark green in color and very deep. In this pool the water was pitch dark, intensely black.”^{xl} On one particular morning, as the community was still sleeping, and as Chaka was bathing according to his prescribed custom, “a warm wind began to blow...The reeds on the banks of the river swayed violently...and shook in a mad frenzy.”^{xli} It seems the very nature of Chaka’s bathing place – a space symbolizing not only the cleansing of a history of illegitimacy but also of empowerment towards his eventual rule – this ecosystem is shaken to its very core as a portentous sign of Chaka’s meeting with the “King of the Deep Pool,” a giant serpent whose presence was not only foretold to Chaka by his doctor, but whose appearance marks the first time Chaka is assured of his eventual ascension to unprecedented power.

As Chaka stands in the water of the pool, confronting the great serpent, he has come face to face with something of a symbolic representative of the environment which he will eventually rule over: “They stared at each other, the snake in its own abode and the man come there to provoke it. They stared at each other in that manner with Chaka’s hand refusing to leave the tuft of hair where the strong medicine was.”^{xlii} Chaka must confront this manifestation of the land where he will one day be king and hold sway. It is clear that this is also something of a trespass onto the “abode” of the great serpent, and as such it suggests that Chaka’s meeting with him is something of a test, but also a moment in which the landscape offers a strange form of blessing on Chaka’s rule. After the snake has anointed Chaka with its tongues, and again a wind rises, a thick mist covers the whole scene and from the reed banks of the river a “heavy, stentorinous voice” is heard chanting, “Mphu-mphu, hail! / Kalamajweng, Kalamajweng!...” and then a softer voice, still from

the reeds proceeds, “Hail! Hail! This land is yours, child of my compatriot, / You shall rule over nations and their kings / You shall rule over peoples of diverse traditions”^{xlili} In this scene, Mofolo display the importance of the environment in the imagining of this historical tale. It seems that one does not come to understand the significance of Chaka’s reign without first witnessing his submersion into the great pool, and symbolically *his submission to the rules governing the life-world of this ecological system*. The voice heralding Chaka’s coming rule does not even come from the serpent himself, but rather, it seems, from the very mists and reeds in which Chaka has taken refuge. Mofolo writes the land as calling in some ways for the tectonic shifts in the geo-political order written across its surface and bringing together a collusion of various and different “peoples of diverse traditions.” As the serpent recedes into the pool and the voices dissipate, “the mist opened up and moved away from him, but it did not go back into the water from where it had come, but simply vanished and was no longer there; *but more accurately we might say it seeped into his [Chaka] body*.”^{xliv}

At a later moment in the quest to gain his father’s throne, Chaka follows Isanusi to the grave of his own father, Senzagakhona. Isanusi is Chaka’s second doctor, who comes to him on the latter’s exilic journeys across southern Africa and promises Chaka unprecedented and unbridled power over this land. After he works on Chaka with medicines, Isanusi “dug a little on Senzagakhona’s grave, and made a hollow which was not too deep, and he cradled himself in it and then began to speak in a language which Chaka did not understand...and as he spoke the mound over the grave began to shake and tremble.”^{xlv} Not just references to traditional *muthi* medicinal practices and ancestor veneration, Isanusi’s actions are grounded by a profound investment in the very soil

where Chaka's father lies. Through a physical proximity to, even an intimacy with, the earth, Isanusi transmits messages through Senzagakhona to Chaka's ancestors. Strangely, and perhaps to the point about the relationality across groups, Isanusi's communication with Chaka's ancestors is in a language foreign to Chaka. While the doctor communicates with the ancestors through the grave, his servant Malunga "stabbed the ground often with Chaka's spear" and upon retrieving from the earth each time he would point "its sharp edge westwards, then northwards, then southwards, until he had finished all the four points of the earth. When he finished, he plunged that spear of Chaka's into the soil of his father's grave."^{xlvi} While Malunga symbolically offers a performative and prophetic mapping of Chaka's reign, indeed excavating the power and authority from the soil of the father's grave, Isanusi holds court with a host of ancestors through Senzagakhona's grave who, again to Chaka's surprise, speak in a foreign tongue. "Rising from under the depths of the soil, out of the grave," Chaka hears the voices of both his father but also the names of "great-great ancestors" in this communiqué.^{xlvi}

The result of this transaction with the soil of Senzagakhona's grave is that Chaka receives his father's as well as his ancestors' blessing to rule, to "be a *man*; be a king," as Senzagakhona puts it. Sanctioned over the very earth where his ancestors lie, Chaka's kingship is as this moment solidified, and as he returns from the grave in the early hours of dawn, the very earth itself seems to offer a supportive exhale to Chaka's kingship: "The wind had died down, and it was perfectly still, *as if all creation were paying homage to that moment when Chaka was returning from his father's grave.*"^{xlvi} In Mofolo's rendering it is not only the sanctity of the ancestor relationship that must be activated in the assumption of kingship and nation formation in the case of Chaka and the

creation of the Zulu peoples, but it is also a profound engagement with the very environment to be ruled in the future. If Chaka's reign is to be catalyst for a seismic shift in the geopolitical tectonics of southern Africa, a dramatic break from the early mytho-poetical moments of the novel's opening, "in the early days, when the people were still settled upon the land," then this break – which brings together different peoples from across southern African – is in some ways imagined through multiple transactions with the ecology of the novel's setting.

Conclusion: The Untimely Narratives of the Anthropologist and the Storyteller

Achille Mbembe, in his piece "African Modes of Self-Writing," displaces the paradigm of essentialism animating criticism of and on Africa by writing:

Against the arguments of critics who have equated identity with race and geography, I show how current African imaginations of the self are born out of disparate but often intersecting practices, the goal of which is not only to settle factual and moral disputes about the world but also to open the way for *self-styling*. By emphasizing historical contingency and the process of subject formation my aim is to reinterpret subjectivity as time.^{xlix}

Characteristic of his other scholarship, in this piece Mbembe garners a sense of identity untethered to the categories of either place or epistemology. I read his "*self-styling*" as a mode of storytelling that frees the subject from the restrictions of static place-based race, and even of aesthetic form in the articulation of identity. I want to conclude by positing

that Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* is an example of this self-styling, one that employs a distinct ecological vision – of relationships between Southern African lands and peoples – as a means to interrogate the categorical and cartographical violence of national formation. Mofolo's self-styling forces the reader to abandon assumptions about both racial/ethnic memory and solidarities as well as about what kind of text is best suited for such upheavals of identification. Writing on the cusp of negotiations over how the 'modern' South African nation would be formed, Mofolo uniquely positions himself vis-à-vis this process by creating a form of writing that transgresses both formal and racial – one might even say epistemological – boundaries, and continues to stand askance to both national genealogies as well as literary canons.

While DeLoughrey and Handley write that an "ecological approach to literature by definition is not restricted to geopolitical, language, and nationality,"¹ I have argued that as a project of historical excavation of southern African landscapes productive of the entanglement of difference, Mofolo's texts also work directly against such categorical delineations of peoples and of racialized demarcations of land. As such, if *Chaka* inaugurates anything it is a call from the beginning of the twentieth century, directed towards the start of the following century, to re-read the history of African literature as a story not of something else, not an allegorical relief of the West's march towards modernity, but as an imagining of an *African* modernity itself; one in which a southern African ecological imaginary is the site of both relationality and entanglement driving the historical movement of a modern South Africa. Within this call, Mofolo outlines a relationship between literary style and the state, between national consciousness and the aesthetics for representing it through the land.

In closing, I want to return briefly to Mofolo's own explicit and peripatetic self-styling; a style that mirrors the steps of the itinerant "traveler" who we meet traversing the landscape of southern African in the first pages of the *Chaka* text. Again, the author states: "I believe that errors of this kind are very many in the book *Chaka*; but I am not concerned about them because *I am not writing history, I am writing a tale...*"^{li} Mofolo's description of his work reveals a savvy assessment of his historical moment and the chosen 'voices' his text speaks through in order to articulate a version of African subjectivity that registers the multiple and often contradictory valences of the otherwise hemmed in and colonized African voice. Through a textual creolization of these registers, Mofolo gives amplitude to an African voice that is at once object and subject of the anthropological imagination, and does so by writing one of the first modern African novels through a mode of storytelling that evokes the epic form. Based on this mingling of styles and registers, I argue that Mofolo, in order to plant the seeds of an anticolonial national consciousness based in the very landscape of the national space, needed the histrionics embedded in the infrastructures of the novel form, while simultaneously allowing the genre of epic to haunt his text in ways that draw attention away from (national) origin stories. Instead of origin narratives, Mofolo tells his "tale" under the signs of quest and of contact. In order to push against history, especially histories of racial and national consolidation, Mofolo's storyteller crosses boundaries and is allowed *to speak from everywhere and nowhere at once*, creating a unique relationship of history (telling) to place.

Mofolo's "tale" speaks of and from another historical moment, offering an un/timely critique of the vicissitudes of the South African nation. In turn this narrative

register is attentive to the ways in which, as DeLoughrey and Handley write, “place encodes time, suggesting that histories embedded in the land and sea have always provided vital and dynamic methodologies for understanding the transformative impact of empire and the anticolonial epistemologies it tries to suppress.”^{lii} A historical ethnography produced from the author’s fieldwork, which is also self-described as “not writing history,” Mofolo’s *Chaka* forces its reader out of the comfort of the known; categories of knowledge, narratives of identity, all become entangled in Mofolo’s telling, destabilizing the category of the modern by speaking from both inside and outside of it. As the novel closes in a climactic moment of fratricide, where Chaka prophesizes the coming of white, European imperialism over the land of southern Africa, we are told how “the Zulus, when they think how they were once a strong nation...they say: ‘They ferment, they curdle! Even great pools dry away!’”^{liii}

Ultimately, Mofolo’s version of history predicates a different imagination of southern African geography. Rather than the segregationist and apartheid historiography of a nation divided along the lines of mythic and essentialist originary differences and delineation, Mofolo’s return to southern African history offers a new relationship to this space; *Chaka* imagines an ecology of relations between and amongst the inhabitants of southern Africa as the basis of a modern South African nation, as well as for the modernity of the South African nation. If we reread *Chaka* in this way, with an eye for how the text’s topographies are predicative of relations between southern Africans, then no longer is the ecological history of South Africa solely one of division, no longer does the very soil of the country speak a language of segregation. Rather, what emerges is precisely this ecology of relations, where the “logic” of the landscape is imagined less as

a grid of classificatory divisions and more as *an ecosystem of connections*. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Mofolo imagined a different history of South Africa, and in doing so, offers another ground, a common one, for thinking about the future of this place.

ⁱ Simon Gikandi. "Realism, Romance, and the Problem of African Literary History." *Modern Language Quarterly*, 73.3 (2012) 310; emphasis mine.

ⁱⁱ Pablo Mukherjee. "Surfing the Second Waves: Amitav Ghosh's Tide Country." *New Formations*, 59 (2006), 144.

ⁱⁱⁱ Key to understanding Mofolo's conception of modernity is a recognition that, for him, a southern African modernity was not a callow copy of an original produced elsewhere, but rather negotiated on and through the very land of this region.

^{iv} Though not published by the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society's press at Morija, Lesotho until 1925, Mofolo had indeed written the manuscript for *Chaka* during 1909-1910.

^v Despite the archival research of many, including myself, these chapters have never been located or published.

^{vi} Daniel P. Kunene, "Introduction" to *Chaka*, xii.

^{vii} Gikandi, "Realism, Romance..." 324.

^{viii} Byron Carminero-Santangelo and Garth Meyers, Eds. *Environment at the Margins: Literary and Environmental Studies in Africa*. (Athens: Ohio University Press 2011) 8; emphasis mine.

^{ix} Anthony Vital. "Towards an African Ecocriticism: Postcolonialism, Ecology, and *Life & Times of Michael K*." *Research in African Literatures*. 39.1 (2008) 88; emphasis mine.

^x Rob Nixon. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 2011), 37.

^{xi} Ursula K. Heise. "A Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism." *PMLA*, 121.2 (2006), 504.

^{xii} Quoted in Heise, 504.

^{xiii} Glissant, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourse* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia 1989), 11

^{xiv} Glissant, Edouard. *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1997), 146.

^{xv} *Chaka* was later, 1931, translated into English by F.H. Dutton. Subsequently, in 1946 its French translation made a rather large impact across the Francophone African and Diaspora worlds, most notably by Leopold S. Senghor's rendering of the Chaka story into poetic verse, which imagined the revolutionary and anticolonial potential of the Chaka figure. See Senghor's *Ethiopiennes*.

^{xvi} Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 134.

^{xvii} Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 105.

^{xviii} Glissant, *Poetics*, 146.

^{xix} *Ibid.*, 143-144.

^{xx} Thomas Mofolo. *Chaka*. (Essex: Heinemann African Writers Series, 1981) 4.

^{xxi} Quoted in David Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* Press (Charlottesville: University of Virginia 2009), 54.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*, 54; emphasis added.

^{xxiii} Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*.

^{xxiv} Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd, *Separate Development: the Positive Side*. Pretoria: Information Service, Department of Native Affairs, 1958.

^{xxv} See for instance Saul Dubow's *Racial Segregation and the Origins of Apartheid in South Africa*. Also, Hermann Giliomee's *The Afrikaners*, and "The Making of the Apartheid Plan, 1929-

1948,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29.2 (2003): 373-392. The latter offers a slightly more apologetic version of this relationship.

^{xxvi} See Sarah Nuttall’s use of “entanglement” in the eponymously titled edition: “Entanglement is a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if resisted, or ignored or uninvited. It is a term which may gesture towards a relationship or set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle, but which also implies human foldedness.” (Nuttall, *Entanglement*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009. 1).

^{xxvii} Mofolo in Kunene, “Introduction,” *Chaka*, xv.

^{xxviii} Perhaps it will be noted that in Sarah Nuttall’s above quoted assessment it was a very similar ascription of southern African geography – “its tri-centric location between the Indian and Atlantic worlds as well as the land mass of the African interior” – that was predisposing of creolization.

^{xxix} Mofolo, *Chaka*, 1; emphasis mine.

^{xxx} Glissant writes that through errantry, “Sometimes, by taking up the problems of the Other, it is possible to find oneself.” *Poetics of Relation*, 18.

^{xxxi} *Ibid.*

^{xxxii} Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 19.

^{xxxiii} *Ibid.*, 18-19.

^{xxxiv} *Ibid.*, 18.

^{xxxv} Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, 57.

^{xxxvi} Thomas Mofolo, *Chaka*, 1-2.

^{xxxvii} Huggan, Graham and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals and the Environment*. (London: Routledge 2010) 13.

^{xxxviii} DeLoughrey, Elizabeth and George Handley. *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literature and the Environment*. (New York: Oxford University Press 2011) 11.

^{xxxix} Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 146.

^{xl} *Chaka*, 21.

^{xli} *Ibid.*, 22.

^{xlii} *Ibid.*, 23.

^{xliii} *Ibid.*, 24.

^{xliv} *Ibid.*, 25; emphasis mine.

^{xlv} *Ibid.*, 81.

^{xlvi} *Ibid.*

^{xlvii} *Ibid.*

^{xlviii} *Ibid.*, 83; emphasis mine.

^{xlix} Achille Mbembe, “African Modes of Self-Writing,” *Public Culture* 14:1 (2002): 242.

^l DeLoughrey and Handley. *Postcolonial Ecologies* 10.

^{li} Mofolo in Kunene, “Introduction,” *Chaka*, xv; emphasis mine.

^{lii} DeLoughrey and Handley, *Postcolonial Ecologies*, 4.

^{liii} *Chaka*, 168.

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